

SKIP BELL

Christ in the City: A Brief Theology

Christians often express a negative attitude toward the city. They see the city as a place where immorality flourishes and Christian beliefs are eroded. Apart from careful reflection, the scripture may appear to support such a view. The descendants of Cain, the first murderer, are city builders (Gen 4). Sodom and Gomorrah are so evil they are destroyed by fire from Heaven (Gen 19:24).

However, the scripture also depicts the city as a positive place provided by God where people are drawn to dwell.

Some wandered in desert wastes, finding no way to a city to dwell in; hungry and thirsty, their soul fainted within them. Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and He delivered them from their distress. He led them by a straight way till they reached a city to dwell in. Let them thank the Lord for His steadfast love, for His wondrous works to the children of man! For He satisfies the longing soul, and the hungry soul He fills with good things. (Ps 107:4-9)

Here the psalmist depicts the city as a place where humans can experience abundant life, a good place. In scripture the city is depicted both as a place where God is glorified and also a place where human sinfulness thrives. So the city is at once a place of promise and a place of evil. "The city, while an accumulator of the energies of culture, is also an accumulator of potencies of evil (Amos 3:9, Micah 1:5)" (Vos 1948:295). As scripture unfolds the plan of redemption, the city becomes a place where the Disciples of Christ must show his love and compassion. The followers of Christ are the redeemed citizens of God's city within every city (Isa 32:14, Dan 9:16).

The concept of the city was born when God asked the first humans to cultivate the garden in which they were placed as their first home. That

space, Eden, was created to support the growth and development of humanity; "And God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it'" (Gen 1:28 ESV). The Garden of Eden (גַּן עֵדֶן, Gan 'Edhen) is the location specified as the place in which this civilization would develop (Gen 2, 3). The name is possibly a derivative of the Akkadian *edinnu*, a word meaning "plain" or "steppe" or may be formed from an Aramaic root meaning "fruitful, well-watered" (Cohen 2011:228, 229). The Hebrew term is translated "pleasure" in Gen 18:12. Clearly Eden is identified as a specific place, a place created for humanity to live, and to live abundantly.

The scriptures make it obvious that the first humans were charged with the stewardship of Eden (Gen 2:15). Cultivating vegetation and caring for animal life was not all God charged humankind with; theirs was the task of creating culture (Gen 1:28-30; 5:1-2). They were to guide the development of art, architecture, science, family, education, and worship. They were to design the very nature and experience of life in Eden. So though Eden offered garden space (the feature we most often recognize in the biblical account) the same garden provided the space for the multiplication of families, dwellings, and the routines of life. That meant the integration of culture in all its aspects. People were to establish homes, live near each other, socialize, play, work, and grow together.

Life experienced in Eden was intended to develop into the life of a city. "The couple in the garden was to multiply, so providing the citizens of the city. Their cultivation of Earth's resources as they extended their control over their territorial environment through the fabrication of sheltering structures would produce the physical architecture of the city" (Kline 1983:23). Provision for life, the tree of life (Gen 2:9), and the waters sustaining life (Gen 2:10), were in Eden. A river is described as flowing "out of Eden to water the garden, and there it divided and became four rivers" (Gen 2:10; see also 11-14). This is a description of a place for dwelling supported by what is required for agriculture, and for the multiplication of cities. God created life with an urban view in mind. "In keeping with this urban intention of God, Genesis images of the garden elsewhere in scripture become urban images" (Conn and Ortiz 2001:87). The psalmist would envision these same features in the "city of God." "There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High" (Ps 46:4).

It should also be noted at this point that God wished to be with his creation in the original Eden (Gen 1:26; 3:8). The first city was to be a place for humankind where God would, at least in some proportion of their lives, be present with them. Neither did God abandon his desire to be with his creation after the fall of humankind into sin. He graciously provided assurance of his presence with fallen humanity in the portable sanctuary

during the wilderness wanderings of Israel, then later in the temple, the center of life in Jerusalem. The scripture envisions God preparing a future heavenly city which he will share with the redeemed. The features of creation that provided for life in Eden are very much a part of the nature of a city, and the Creator's presence is among those qualities. The presence of God, because he is a relational God who fosters community, is intended for a city. The Old Testament prophets envision life through eternity sustained in such a city. "On that day living waters shall flow out from Jerusalem" (Zech 14:8).

The same images in the Old Testament literature that describe what sustains life in the city are employed by the New Testament writers in images of the New Jerusalem. "Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life" (Rev 22:1, 2). The city is the theme of the gift prepared by God as our eternal home in apocalyptic literature. "And I saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God" (Rev 21:2). The city is the dwelling place of God in the recreated earth. "The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it" (Rev 22:3). In the scripture account, all history moves to culmination in restoration of the city, the city of God.

The remainder of this brief article will develop the concept of the city as found throughout the Old and New Testament scriptures, and then will provide a concise theology of the city.

The Old Testament City

In the Old Testament the word for city is applied to villages and larger population centers. There seems to be no distinction based on the size of the human population. A city was wherever people gathered to form a place with protection; it had walls and could afford safety from enemies. It was a place for refuge for those who were wronged, and for wrong doers who were seeking fair treatment in the safety of the city borders (Num 35:25-27; Josh 20, Judg 9:35). It seems that a city was identified as such because it had boundaries, walls, order, could administer justice, and had political identity (Keller 2012:136). It was not so much the size of the geographical space it covered or number of humans inhabiting it, but the presence of those functions that set apart places as cities.

In the journey from Egypt to the Promised Land, Canaan, the families and tribes of Israel wandered as nomads without a city. Theirs was an unsatisfactory experience of transition. They were not true nomads (Benjamin 1983:23), that is, they were on a particular journey to a place, not wandering as their choice for life. In Canaan, which was their destination,

they were to build and inhabit fortified cities, develop places for sanctuary, and nurture culture and worship from such centers (Deut 3:18-20).

No city in the biblical account is more significant than Jerusalem, a centrally located city in the land of promise. Discovered artifacts support the occupation of what is the ancient center of Jerusalem referred to later by the Hebrews as "The City of David" dating back to the 4th millennium before Christ (Freedman 2000:694, 695). There is further evidence to support the claim that the locale was a permanent settlement 3,000 years before Christ (see Jane Cahill's work on this matter in Vaughn and Killebrew 2003:13-81). The Execration texts and Amarna letters refer to the city nearly 2,000 years before Christ (32, 33). The biblical account first mentions Jerusalem as Salem, a city ruled by Melchizedek (Gen 14:18). In the book of Joshua Jerusalem is defined as lying within territory allocated to the tribe of Benjamin (Josh 18:28). David conquered the city in the siege of Jebus, with the city being referred to after that victory as the City of David (Judg 19:10-12; 1 Chr 11:4-7). David then transferred his capital to the city, making it the headquarters of a united kingdom (2 Sam 5:7-9).

King David in making Jerusalem the political and religious capital of Israel envisioned it as a center that would promote worship. It would be a place from which justice would be distributed and modeled for the cities of the nation. With its religious significance, Jerusalem became known as the city of God (1 Kgs 11:36; 2 Kgs 21:4; Neh 11:1). The people of Israel recognized the providence of God and so praised the city as built by God (Ps 48; 87). It was where God dwelled among his people (Ps 46:4). The Israelites knew where to come to enter God's presence. The temple in Jerusalem was where God was enthroned. Jerusalem became so dominant in the culture of Israel that it was simply referred to as the city (Ezek 7:23).

When exiled from Jerusalem the Israelites longed to return to it to be in God's presence (Jer 29). To be in a city where God is has always been the longing of the human heart (Ps 46:4-5; 107:4-7). The original family longed for the blessing of Eden after their banishment. The Israelites longed for Jerusalem. Still today, humankind is drawn to the city with the hope of blessing. For many, Jerusalem provides a symbol of hope for a future city of peace, where God will dwell with his people throughout eternity.

In the Old Testament God is seen as a lover of the city and One who sustains it; "She shall not be moved; God will help her when morning dawns" (Ps 46:5). Psalm 48 pictures the city as the joy of the earth (Ps 48:2), a place where God makes himself known (v. 3), a place God will protect forever (v. 8), where God issues judgment (v. 11), and a place admired for its architecture (v. 13). Jerusalem is to be admired, its beauty shared. God's desire for Jerusalem, the actual city, gave witness to his love and justice for people throughout the earth.

Jerusalem was not the only city that God took note of. In the remarkable story of Jonah, who was sent on a mission of redemption to Ninevah, we see God's love declared for all cities. Ninevah was a city notorious for sin (Jonah 1:2), a place of pluralistic idolatry. Expressing his love for Ninevah, God said to Jonah (who had fled from his missional call) "You pity the plant, for which you did not labor, nor did you make it grow, which came into being in a night and perished in a night. And should not I pity Ninevah, that great city, in which there are more than 120,000 persons who do not know their right hand from their left, and also much cattle?" (Jonah 4:10-11). The significant affirmation is that God cares for the city of Ninevah as much as for Jerusalem.

Babylon was another city with a significant role in the narrative of Israel. Babylon was at first a small town which had sprung up by the beginning of the 2nd millennium BC. Babylon became a significant city under the rule of the Amorite king Hammurabi in the 18th century BC. The region of South Mesopotamia came to be known as Babylonia.

After being destroyed and then rebuilt by the Assyrians, Babylon became the seat of the Neo-Babylonian Empire.

Nebuchadnezzar II reigned in Babylon from 605 BC to 562 BC. The Accadian name, Nabû-kudurri-ušur, means, "O god Nabu, preserve/defend my firstborn son" (Lamb 1960:104). Nebuchadnezzar was the son of the king Nabopolassar. Nabu is the Babylonian deity of wisdom, and son of the god Marduk. It was Nebuchadnezzar who besieged Jerusalem in 597 BC and deposed king Jehoiakim, destroyed the temple, and took Daniel captive with other Israelites (see 2 Kgs 20; 24-25; 2 Chr 36; Ezra 5; Jer 29; Dan 1; 2). As a ruler in the context of ancient Babylon, divine power was claimed by the king. Nebuchadnezzar believed it only appropriate that the citizens worship him as a god (Dan 3). Because of the destruction of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple, those taken captive into Babylon, including Israel's religious and political leaders, and the assumption of divinity in opposition to the Jewish idea of monotheism, it was appropriate for the Israelites to disdain Babylon and reject that city and empire as a place of evil.

False prophets among the Israelites announced the end of the Babylonian exile, the captivity, and release from the crushing effect of its culture on their faith (Jer 28). The oppression delivered by Babylon was devastating. The intention of the rulers of Babylon was to assimilate Israel into Babylonian culture so thoroughly that Israel would forget its monotheism and conform to the worship and culture of that imperial city. Without question, Babylon represented a risk to the faith and culture of the Hebrews. But God's intention was for the exiles to remain in Babylon until an appointed time. "Build houses . . . plant gardens . . . take wives . . . multi-

ply there. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare" (Jer 29:5-7). God called the Israelites to live their faith though living in the midst of sin in that city, to be faithful, and to seek good for the others in Babylon.

The New Testament City

The ministry of Jesus was centered in cities. That is not to deny his demonstrated concern for those living in isolated places, but is simply a recognition that the Gospels relate his mission as taking him from city to city. The imagery he employed in his teaching draws from the city just as it does from the scenes of rural agriculture. He speaks of courts (Matt 5:25), the city market (Matt 23:7), financial exchanges (Matt 25:27), and tax collecting (Matt 9:10), all of which are urban images. The final purpose of his ministry was destined to occur in the city of Jerusalem. The Gospel writer Luke uses the journey to Jerusalem as a key turning point in the entire narrative of his Gospel: "He set His face to go to Jerusalem" (Luke 9:51). The primary focus of Jesus' ministry was the city.

In Jesus, God enters into humanity to dwell with them. God has always intended to dwell with his people, to be where they are. That was intended in the garden city of Eden. The same intention was visibly expressed to his people in the sanctuary that accompanied their wilderness wanderings and then in the temple built in Jerusalem. The temple was a place symbolizing God's presence, and it was located in the city. Jesus is God with us, Immanuel (Matt 1:23), thus a fulfillment of the temple. He is in a spiritual sense the new temple. "So the Jews said to Him, 'What sign do you show us for doing these things?' Jesus answered them, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.' . . . But He was speaking about the temple of His body" (John 2:18-21).

John describes Jesus restoring worship in the temple building in Jerusalem early in his ministry (John 2:13-17). Jesus had a high regard for the temple because it provided a compelling witness of God's presence and his salvation of humankind. It was a place to learn of God and to worship. That place was situated in the heart of Jerusalem and was often the scene of Jesus' ministry. God designed that the city would provide a center for worship and spirituality. In similar fashion, Jesus viewed his disciples, including all those who would believe in him for generations to come, as a witness to humanity through the city—a "city set on a hill" (Matt 5:14). The future city Jesus promised was envisioned as a witness to the universe, free from the idols of humanity, a place where God dwells in the center of the city (Rev 21:22). That city is a gift of God (Heb 11:16).

Jerusalem in the first century was an especially dangerous place for Jesus, but he labored for its salvation without regard for his safety (Luke 13:34). It was not an idyllic place where righteousness reigned. Of course the criminal and immoral influences of the city created danger. Jesus and his disciples experienced that danger just as all others in the city did. But the religious leaders posed an added risk for Jesus. They were threatened by Jesus, and plotted to kill him (Mark 3:6). He was tried by legal officials who were more concerned for their political fortunes than for justice (John 19). Jesus recognized that the city was forsaken not merely for its crime and immorality, but due to its political and religious corruption (Luke 13:35).

That reality did not deter Jesus from ministry in and for the city. Jesus entered the city on the first day of the Passion Week, thus demonstrating the initiative of God coming into his place. Aware that it would be his last week in Jerusalem, foreseeing the tragedies lying ahead for Jerusalem, Jesus paused to reflect on the city. So great was his love for the city that he wept for it (Luke 19:41). Rather than forsake the city, Jesus then entered and began the days of service that would result in his own sacrifice. He healed, cared for people, restored temple worship, and taught in the temple (Luke 19:45-48). Though the city would reject him, he would not turn away from sacrificial service in the city.

In the crucifixion Jesus received the full sinfulness of the city, and provided for its redemption. Significantly, each of the synoptic Gospels relates the rending of the curtain separating the most holy place from the holy place in the Jerusalem temple as occurring when Jesus died on the cross (Matt 27:51; Mark 15:38; Luke 23:45). It was in that specific place within the temple that the presence of God had been demonstrated among the people. God had provided in the most holy place assurance of his presence. The tearing of the curtain meant that in Christ God has become present with the people, never to be separated from them. God had fulfilled his offering of reconciliation, and by faith we claim his presence with us in Christ and in the Holy Spirit. That sacrificial act of Calvary was situated at the border of the city.

Acts describes a church that was closely united as a community, that was evangelistic, and that was very urban (Acts 2:1, 5). The world of the book of Acts was cosmopolitan, marked by distinct cities that identified each region. The Holy Spirit came upon the apostles as they met together in Jerusalem (Acts 1:4). Through persecution the church was dispersed from Jerusalem but established in cities throughout Judea and Samaria (Acts 8:1). Jerusalem was in one sense replaced by Antioch, a Greek city, because it becomes another focal point for the distribution of the Gospel (Acts 13). No longer was the place of God thought of as being located in

only one city, Jerusalem, but was wherever people were. The expansion of the church throughout the world was in the cities. The narratives of the Epistles describe the expansion of the church centered in such urban areas.

Paul embarked on three mission trips that were initiated in specific cities and that marked the mission journeys by scenes in one city after another (Acts 13, 15, 18). John Stott chronicles the mission of Paul to expand the reach of the Gospel in those cities. From centers like Athens, the intellectual capital of the Greco-Roman world, to Ephesus, and Heierapolis, Laodicea, Colossae, and the cities of the Lycus valley, Paul focused his mission on the city (1990:293-314). Paul's urban vision eventually led him to share the gospel in the imperial city of Rome. Once in Rome, he stayed there and contributed to the formation of the church in that city. It was in the planting of the church in Rome that the gospel then moved on to the entire world. Paul was a city person who lived out his life in cities, eventually suffering martyrdom in Rome.

The book of Hebrews emphasizes a vision for the city of God. The city is described as something we look forward to. Abraham looked forward to a city "whose designer and builder is God" (Heb 11:10). Though roaming the earth in tents, "God has prepared for them a city" (Heb 11:16). The future city is the inheritance of the followers of Jesus, who "have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem" (Heb 12:22). Followers of Christ have become residents of that future city by faith (Heb 13:14).

The book of Revelation is addressed to seven city churches (Rev 1:4; 2; 3). Judgment is announced on Babylon, the imperial city that oppressed the city of God (Rev 18:10). And many interpreters of Revelation 13 see in its imagery the city of Rome, specifically as a religious and political power. The end of the apocalyptic book describes the New Jerusalem, coming down to establish God's presence with people throughout eternity (Rev 21:2). The New Jerusalem is described in very real terms. The materials used to build its streets, walls, and gates are related in detail. It is described in dimensions that emphasize its enormous size in order to provide for the redeemed from the ages who dwell there with God. Its gates are open. God dwells there, so it is a temple, the temple of God.

Harvey Conn describes the New Jerusalem in eschatological imagery as the fulfillment of God's intention. "This eschatological strand repeatedly ties the future of the city with the original, sinless past of Eden and its restoration in Christ" (1979:237). Conn asserts that if sin had not entered this world, Eden would have become what the New Jerusalem envisions, a perfect city. The New Jerusalem is Eden restored, a place to build culture, to find safety, and to be with God.

Conclusion

God is relational by nature, and created humankind in his likeness with that same propensity (Gen 1:26). From the very beginning of creation, humans were to inhabit and develop the culture of a garden city God had prepared for them. God intended to commune with them there. Though humankind separated themselves from him in the fall to sin, God refused to abandon his desire to dwell with his creation.

Thus, cities are not accidental happenings; they are, if we can imagine them unspoiled by sin, God's intention. Cities are not in themselves an outgrowth of sinfulness. The cultivation and nurture of life was committed by God to humans, and naturally resulted in the formation and multiplication of cities across the earth for that purpose. Culture was formed in the cities that developed as the human population spread. The responsibility to serve as faithful stewards of the earth required the formation of those cities. Thus, the city was God's intention, a means for fulfilling the command of the Creator, not a retreat from his mandate.

In the Old Testament we find the record of a people God established to provide a faithful witness to his character for all the peoples of the earth. He accompanied the Hebrew people during their wilderness wanderings, and then provided for his presence with them in Jerusalem. Jerusalem was the place of the temple, and the city was envisioned as the City of God. Life in Old Testament times developed around cities. They were places of safety, places for extended families to grow, and the center of spiritual life.

In the New Testament Christ is announced as God with us (Matt 1:23) and as the new temple built without hands (Acts 7:47, 48). Further, Christ's disciples are envisioned as becoming the city of his dwelling.

For through Him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In Him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. (Eph 2:19-22)

In Christ's sacrifice we have entrance into the Kingdom of God; we become citizens of the heavenly city (Heb 11:16).

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant. (Heb 12:22-24)

In the heavenly Jerusalem we have access to God through Christ who is our high priest who is ministering for us in this present age. Thus, in Jesus we experience restoration with God in the sanctuary of the heavenly New Jerusalem where God dwells. We find refuge in this heavenly city just as the people of God found refuge in the cities of ancient times (Heb 2:17; 6:18-20). Our hope is in Christ, and we are citizens of the City of God.

A theology of the city compels us to engage in mission in the city. God cares for the city. He has provided a sacrifice for urban dwellers and sends us to make disciples in that environment. Just as he dwelt among us, he calls us to dwell among those who live in the city, for they too need the gospel. Sinfulness is a reality in the city, as it is wherever humans dwell. But we are to claim the promise of the Holy Spirit and live among those who need the gospel.

Christians should prayerfully adopt positive attitudes toward living and working in the city. The city itself must not be blamed for the sinfulness of humanity. We cannot be missional, or incarnational in the process of disciple making, without living with and among the community we serve. God has called us to the city.

Works Cited

- Benjamin, Don C. 1983. *Deuteronomy and City Life: A Form Criticism of Texts with the Word CITY in Deuteronomy 4:41-26:19*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.
- Cohen, Chaim. 2011. Eden. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion*. Edited by Adele Berlin and Maxine Grossman, 228, 229. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Conn, Harvie. 1979. Christ and the City: Biblical Themes for Building Urban Theology Models. In *Discipling the City*, edited by Roger Greenway, 222-286. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker.
- Conn, Harvie M., and Manuel Ortiz. 2001. *Urban Ministry: The Kingdom, the City, and the People of God*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic.
- Freedman, David Noel. 2000. *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- Keller, Timothy. 2012. *Center Church*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.
- Kline, Meredith G. 1983. *Kingdom Prologue*. Vol. 2. South Hamilton, MA: M. G. Kline.
- Lamb, Harold. 1960. *Cyrus the Great*. New York: Doubleday.
- Stott, John R. W. 1990. *The Message of Acts: The Spirit, the Church, and the World*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity.
- Vaughn, Andrew G., and Ann E. Killebrew, eds. 2003. Jerusalem at the Time of the United Monarchy. In *Jerusalem in Bible and Archaeology: The First Temple Period*. SBL Symposium Series 18. Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature.
- Vos, Geerhardus. 1948. *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.



Skip Bell is Professor of Church Leadership and Director of the Doctor of Ministry Program at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, Andrews University. Dr. Bell has authored *A Time to Serve: Church Leadership for the 21st Century*, published in 2003, is the editor and primary contributor for *Servants and Friends: A Biblical Theology of Leadership*, published in 2014, and numerous academic and professional articles. He is a member of the Academy of Religious Leadership, the Society of Biblical Literature, and the Association for Doctor of Ministry Education.